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CONCERNING A PROPOSED TRANSLATION OF THE EDDA

It is strange—to say the least—that there is no good complete translation of the Poetic Edda on the market.

There is Benjamin Thorpe's version, published in 1866. This was a rather poor performance at the time and is now out of print. It was, to be sure, reprinted in the so-called "Norræna Series", but as to this, least said is soonest mended. For that matter, I never was able to arrive at any conclusion as to whether Thorpe's performance was meant to be in verse or prose.

The very respectable prose version of Vígfusson in the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, made in 1884, is now thoroughly antiquated. At best, it represented the frequently erratic and generally unacceptable theories of that brilliant scholar. It is on the market for those who can pay \$30. It has not been, nor does it deserve to be, reprinted.

Lastly, there is Olive Bray's pedestrian translation (1908) of the mythological poems of the Edda published in the Transactions of the Viking Club.¹ As no more has appeared, these ten years, it is safe to say that the undertaking has, for the time being, been abandoned.

Fortunately, it is not likely that this regrettable condition will continue long. As I learn, there are now no less than five new versions under way, nearing completion, or completed. It is not easy to forecast how good these will be; but the hope is justifiable that the publishers will consult competent scholars on their respective merits. My own translation is one of those nearing completion. While engaged in this work the following reflections and considerations have occurred to me.

When envisaging the task of translating the Poetic Edda into a modern Germanic tongue it becomes plain that two, and only two, courses are open: either a rendering into prose; which means, inevitably, a total (and to my feeling unwarranted) obliteration of its salient characteristics, or else a faithful reproduction, or imitation, if you please, of the original in the original metres.

Now, as regards the use of prose for the rendering of Old Germanic poetry, I have no prejudice against it. In fact, I confess that Tinker's prose rendering of *Beowulf* appeals rather more to me than, say, Gummere's or Leslie Hall's versions in the original metre. Nor is it my intention to enter here into a discussion as to the merits of prose, as against verse, translations of Old Germanic monuments in general. Such a discussion simply does not apply to the *Edda*—which is not—like *Beowulf*, the other great Anglo-Saxon poems, and the Old Saxon *Heliand*—, an epic poem composed in one and the same metre throughout; but, rather, a collection of poetic material of the most various kinds. It is to be recalled that among its forty odd numbers there are didactic poems, genealogical rigmorles, roystering dramatic ballads, elegiac songs, rough, coarse 'flytings,' purely narrative poems, and still other kinds. And hardly two agree in their handling of the three basic stanza forms employed, let alone stylistic differences. It would obviously be a hopeless and vain task to make any prose

¹ *Viking Club Translation Series*. Vol. 2.

convey a tittle more than their bare contents—which would be utterly unfair to the genius of the individual poems. It would cheat the student who has a right to demand at least an adumbration of the original in spirit and appeal.

But if prose be rejected, I can see no other alternative than just an absolutely faithful adherence to the original metres. For what other course is open to us? To write alliterative verse and then, *ad libitum*—or, shall I maliciously say, *propter necessitatem*—to do for several lines, or even stanzas, at a time without alliteration (which, I submit, is the very stuff and substance of the alliterative measures)—as does Olive Bray, is to fall between two stools. Again, it goes without saying, we cannot translate a *Ljóðaháttir* stanza in *Fornyrðislag* metre. Even to change *Málaháttir* into *Fornyrðislag*, and vice versa, is unwarranted. Nor is it possible to substitute a measure of our own invention;² unless, indeed, we intend to make a paraphrase and not a translation, as did e.g., William Morris in his *Earthly Paradise*. So, I say, there is no alternative to prose but just an absolutely faithful adherence to the original metres.

By faithful adherence I mean, of course, not slavish adherence. If, e.g., stanzas of the original should contain, here and there, as a license, a three-syllable half-line in a *Fornyrðislag* metre poem I would certainly not feel myself bound to follow suit. I hold it a good rule that the translator should, if anything, stick closer to the norm than the original: the possibility of text corruptions should very properly ever be present to him; unless, of course, irregularity be the norm, as in the *Hárbarðsljóð*.

Obviously, in the rendering of the sense of a passage it frequently may be necessary, owing to deep-going differences between archaic Old Norse and Modern English, to let whole stanzas go into the melting pot, to be entirely recast in conformity with English syntax. To do this, without serious damage to the spirit of the original, naturally is the hardest part of the translator's task and one insuperable but to the serious student of Old Norse literature.

In the matter of text it should be the translator's endeavor to adhere to the manuscript readings whenever possible. Personally, I do not let this prevent me from siding with the so-called 'constructive' editors, notably Gering, Finnur Jónsson, Sijmons—who refuse to grovel before the readings of the codices in all cases, as do Neckel, Detter and Heinzl—even where the corruption thereof stinketh to heaven, or at any rate defies an intelligent understanding.

Neither do I see why manifest interpolations should not be translated, if marked as such; or, again, why some of the happy restorations, by Gering, Sophus Bugge, and Svend Grundtvig, of lost lines or stanzas should not be incorporated, providing the conjecture be made evident as such at a glance.

On the other hand I refuse to go as far as Genzmer, the author of the most recent German translation, who under the leadership of the brilliant and poetically gifted Andreas Heusler attempts a *rapprochement* to modern taste

² I call attention to my colleague, Professor Leonard's adaptation of the Nibelungen stanza for the translation of Beowulf. (*University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature*.) No. 2.

which, I am ready to admit, is at times highly satisfactory, but by that very fact open to suspicion.

I need hardly add that surely no one has any business to attempt a translation of an Old Germanic monument who is not thoroughly conversant with both its higher and lower criticism. This is especially true in the case of the Edda, where whole stanzas have been most variously interpreted and the text fairly bristles with difficulties of all kinds. To pin one's faith to one edition or text will never do; for if the translator should follow one edition through thick and thin he will presently find himself the slave of his chosen editor's theories;³ instead of standing on his own feet. Let him bear in mind that, though assuredly interpretation, a translation is not a text.

The great difficulty of doing alliterative verse into Modern English lies in the restricted number of words from the old stock at hand. For, while scouting any rigorously puristic ideas, I yet hold emphatically that, to give a fair equivalent, Germanic material must be drawn upon to the utmost extent, and later elements used most sparingly and only whenever indispensable or unavoidable, and even then only after anxiously considering whether consonant with the total effect of the whole. The stylistic feeling of the translator must here be the court of last instance; for what is perfectly proper in one place—say in the more mediæval and knightly *Allamål*—may be utterly out of place in a rough-shod ballad such as the *Thrymskviða*. And yet, I say it again, I lay the utmost stress on avoiding non-Germanic material, and see failure or success in the skill and resourcefulness with which the old vocabulary is handled.

At the same time I do not mean to be squeamish and avoid a given word just because it is not found in Anglo-Saxon before the battle of Hastings, or because I have preconceived notions about the relative merit of Teutonic and French-Latin elements. Any one who has given the matter thought knows that no amount of linguistic contortions will furnish Germanic equivalents for such oft-recurring words, embodying absolutely basic conceptions of Old Teutonic antiquity, as: war, battle, hero, glory, revenge, defeat, victory, peace, honor, and the like.⁴ Still, wherever possible, Germanic words ought to be chosen, not because of Anglo-Saxo-mania, but because of the tang and flavor still residing in the homelier indigenous speech-material. I have no quarrel with those who are not aware of this. They are suffering with the painless evil of Ajax.

Another difficulty: the old Germanic poetry, however scant in content, and in however narrow circle it moves, is phenomenally rich in vocabulary and shines with a dazzling array of synonyms for one and the same conception. Scherer has shown how this state of affairs was brought about by the very principle of alliteration, and in its turn finally gave rise to the empty verbiage and jingling of Skaldic poetry, where sense is drowned in a flood of *heiti* and

³ I note, e.g., that the author of a most valuable recent edition, with a cliquishness wholly unbecoming to serious scholarship, virtually ignores valuable suggestions made in a rival undertaking which I, for my part, gladly accept.

⁴ May I take this opportunity again to call the attention of Germanic scholars to the remarkable volumes of Vilhelm Grönbech, *Vor Folkeat i Oldtiden* dealing fundamentally with these conceptions; see my reviews, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 1910, p. 269-278, and 1915, p. 124-135.

kennings. The Edda shows almost all stages in this development short of the final consummation, from the austere art of the *Völundarkviða* to the ornate manner of the *Hymiskviða*. When we take into consideration that the Old poet had at his disposal, some 20 words for 'man,' 23 for 'hero,' 48 for 'prince,' 32 for 'brave,' 20 for 'treasure,' 25 for 'battle,' 30 for 'wise,'⁵ and so forth, it will be clear that, in order to avoid the overhanging danger of monotony,⁶ all the resources of the English vocabulary ought to be at one's disposal. I am thinking chiefly of the material in the Scottish and English ballads. The reader ought to understand this and not balk at words like *etin*, *fey*, *grisly*, *feally*, *bairn*, and the like.

Of course it is important here not to weight a stanza down with an undue number of archaic and obsolete expressions. The much overpraised translations of William Morris e.g. have done more harm than good by rendering the Old Norse sagas into a most perplexing and astonishing English which requires a pretty fair acquaintance with Anglo-Saxon, Edmund Spenser, and Thomas Mallory to be rightly understood. *Vestigia terreni!* Still worse is an injudicious mixture of Latin and Anglo-Saxon elements. As to this, the very respectable scholar Benjamin Thorpe should be a warning and an example.⁷

The proper rendition of Old Norse proper names presents a knotty problem to the would-be translator. Shall he translate them all, to the best of his knowledge—and that is a difficult task; or some only, and if so which? Or shall he leave all untranslated—much the easiest course. Or shall he try to render only those parts of proper nouns, which are of more general significance? E.g.: shall he call the dwarf *Alvis* or *Allwise*; *Thor*, *Sithgrani's* son or *Long-beard's* son; the seeress, *Hyndla* or *Houndling*; the localities *Gnipalund* and *Hátun*, *Cliffholt* and *Hightown*? Shall we say *Alfheim*, *Elfham*, or *Alf-home*? Are we to render *Skioldungar*, *Ylfingar* by *Shieldings* and *Wolfings*? And so forth, and so forth. I do not hesitate to say that on the translator's tact and skill in meeting this problem—for dodge it he cannot—will depend in large measure the artistic merit of his work and its modicum of palatableness to the modern reader.

Aside from these obstacles, the difficulty of reproducing alliterative verses in English has, to my mind, been exaggerated. To be sure, English has lopped

⁵ See Richard M. Meyer, *Die altgermanische Poesie, nach ihren formelhaften Elementen beschrieben*, p. 170 ff., and Theodor Wisén, *Om Ordjogningen i den äldre Eddan*, p. 2 ff.

⁶ I note, for example, that in the 43 stanzas of the *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* alone there occur 19 words for 'hero.' No apologies are needed for my translation being even more monotonous, stylistically, and more narrowly Germanic, than the original. Any yielding to the impulse to 'touch up' the leanness of the manner of poems of this nature by resorting to allusions, conceptions, descriptive epithets and adjectives foreign to their habit will at once introduce a false note.

⁷ Let me cite the first four stanzas of his rendering of the *Hymiskviða* as a sample of barbaric and absurd mixing of these elements—one wonders whether he had any feeling whatsoever for the emotional connotation of words: 1) Once the celestial gods had been taking fish and were in computation, ere they the truth discovered. Rods they shook and blood inspected, when they found at Ægir's a lack of kettles. 2) Sat the rockdweller glad as a child, much like the son of Misorblindi. In his eyes looked Ygg's son steadfastly: "Thou to the Aesir shalt oft a computation give." 3) Caused trouble to the Jotun th' unwelcome worded As: he forthwith meditated vengeance on the gods. Sif's husband he besought a kettle him to bring "in which beer for all of you I may brew." 4) The illustrious gods found that impossible, nor could the exalted powers it accomplish till from true-heartedness Ty to Hlorrithi much friendly counsel gave.

off about all its inflectional endings and is frequently and exasperatingly monosyllabic, especially in its Anglo-Saxon elements; whence an unavoidable inclination on the part of the translator to pack too much into the arsis and to overwork Sievers' type E, as against C and D. Yet, with reasonable diligence and care this tendency may be largely counteracted.

As to the result and success of a translation along the lines above indicated I would say that I cherish no unwarrantable optimism. Of such a translation even if made with unerring skill and infinite resourcefulness may be said, with still greater justice, though in a different sense, what the Ettrick Shepherd's mother said to Sir Walter Scott: "There was never ane of ma sangs prentit till ye prentit them yoursels, and ye hae spoilt them atehgither. They were made for singing and no for reading, but ye hae broken the charm now, and they'll niver be sung mair. . . ." Surely, never. And, indeed, it is open to doubt in how far the modern ear feels any pleasure in the clash and clang of recurrent initial sound, as it certainly does in the music of rhythm and rime; and is not offended, rather, by the essential irregularity of the Old Germanic line. As to myself, I confess that the measure of satisfaction which I derive from alliterative verse may be due to years of occupation with it. It is only fair to acknowledge that it has become utterly foreign to our habit. So I am aware that an alliterative version of the Edda, though logically the best, and however well done, has no chance whatsoever to become 'popular reading.' It will have to stand on its merits as an adequate help to students of Old Germanic literatures and folklore who cannot afford the time to go into a detailed study of the Edda, yet wish to have in their hands a reasonably fair approximation of the original. Even so, somewhat lengthy introductions, explanations, and copious foot-notes will be found indispensable aids in to a proper understanding of this hoary ruin of antiquity.

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